1: Wilson E-5 (1934-1938) 1951 FN17 Ngonde FN17
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usually has a separate hut for its girls, to which, we were told, their lovers come secretly by night.

Nyakyusa informants connected the existence of girls' houses with the marriage age. In Ngonde the marriage age of girls is much higher than it is among the Nyakyusa, partly because there are many more Christians (45 per cent as against 16 per cent) who do not allow polygyny, partly because even the girls from pagan families in Ngonde dislike marrying a polygynist, and partly because a much higher percentage of young men are away at work, than from Nyakyusa country. Formerly, they said, the marriage age was higher among the Nyakyusa also, and then the Nyakyusa had *isaka*. It is certain that among the Nyakyusa betrothal of a girl has long taken place before puberty, for the husband plays an essential part in the puberty ritual, and there were always some girls who were betrothed when quite tiny; but the evidence is fairly clear that the average age of betrothal among the pagans has been going down. The Nyakyusa view is that no man in his senses, who is able to marry, will engage a little girl of eight if he can find one approaching puberty; and it is the scarcity of wives that makes men 'marry' little girls. It is also clear that the number of cattle in the country, and their rate of circulation, has increased during the last two decades, so there are 'too many cattle chasing too few brides' with the result that the marriage age of girls has fallen, and the number of cattle given at marriage has increased.

Once she is betrothed, a girl's 'husband' has exclusive sexual rights over her, and she cannot entertain lovers in the *isaka*. The only two occasions on which she may flirt and have external relations with a man other than her husband, are during an initiation ceremony, when the girls of the village who have not yet reached puberty sleep with their fellow who is being initiated, and there entertain young men, and when she accompanies a bride to her husband's house. A bridegroom is expected to have external relations with his wife's two friends, as well as with his wife, on the night they bring her to his house. Love-making at the initiation-marriage ritual is held to be 'part of the ritual' and a means of sex education, and a husband can make no complaint about his 'wife' receiving lovers then, provided that penetration does not take place.

Homosexual practices are said to be very common in the boys'

2: Wilson E-5 (1934-1938)1957 FN17 Ngonde FN17
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CHAPTER IV

THE RITUAL OF PUBERTY AND MARRIAGE

1. IN SELVA AND MUNGONDE

(a) *The events*

881 The puberty ritual for girls among the Nyakyusa is fused with the
885 marriage ritual. Girls are usually betrothed well before puberty
887 and they may live with their 'husbands' for some time before they
● 896 grow up, for the view of most Nyakyusa is that a girl should become accustomed to her husband gradually and that it is good for her to visit him from time to time, sweeping his house, cleaning the byre, drawing water and cooking for him, and learning the art of love-making with him and no one else. While she is still very immature it is insisted that he should only have intercourse with her *inter crura*, but when she is approaching puberty he often has full intercourse with her. No legal case can be brought against him in court if he does so, provided that he has not forced or frightened her, but his friends may tell him he is foolish, and is 'teaching his wife adultery', since now he can have no proof, in the physical examination at puberty, that she has not slept with other men. No stigma attaches to the girl; if it is her husband who has deflowered her she is acclaimed in the ritual as a virgin. In some pagan families, however, notably those of chiefs, girls are not allowed to visit their husbands before puberty. The girl's father has the right to
[[70]] refuse it, for before the ritual a wife is only 'borrowed'. Unlike the neighbouring Bemba, the Nyakyusa are not anxious lest the girl should conceive before her first menstruation—if she should do so the ritual is performed in the ordinary way—but many fathers dislike letting their daughters go before the main bulk of the marriage cattle have been handed over. Opposition on the part of the missions and the Administration to early marriage also influences the more sophisticated. The period of betrothal is long, for pagan
[[45]] girls are commonly engaged from about 8 years old onwards, and the average age of puberty appears to be between 15 and 16.[1]

2: Wilson E-5 (1934-1938)1957 FN17 Ngonde FN17
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and the average age of puberty appears to be between 15 and 16.[1] [145]

With the onset of first menstruation the ritual (*ukwipaga kwa-* [88]
nanaga) starts immediately: it is begun even for a girl not yet betrothed, though for her it cannot be completed. The main acts are a treatment of the 'bride' (*nanaga*) with medicines to fortify her against the dangers of menstruation and intercourse; seclusion at her father's homestead and a driving of the shades of his lineage from her body that she may conceive by her husband; instruction in the duties of a wife; examination for virginity; and the exchange of feasts between her husband's family and her own to celebrate her maturity and virginity.

The first treatment is with a medicine called *undumila*. 'If the girl grows up at her father's place we, her mothers, treat her at once; if at her husband's she is sent home to us, if it is near, but if it is far away, her husband's mothers treat her there.' She must take the medicine before she tastes any food after the onset of menstruation. A pungent-tasting root is pushed through the tip of a funnel or 'cup' made of a leaf of the bark-cloth tree, and salt is poured into the cup. The girl takes the tip of the root in her mouth and pulls it inward with her teeth, thus causing the salt to trickle into her mouth. Her mother also makes millet porridge and adds to it a medicine, *ikipiki*, and gives a little to her, burying the rest under the hearth of the hut.

She is then secluded in her mother's hut. Her girl friends who have not yet reached puberty prepare a litter of banana leaves for her to sit and sleep upon, and they keep her company (*ukupanja*), hence their name, *akupanja*. They come 'to cheer their fellow that she should not be left alone'. They sleep with her on the litter, and spend the greater part of their days there, learning to depilate and adorn themselves and, some say, to stretch the vagina by manual manipulation. Food for them is provided by the bride's mother, and on the litter they entertain the young men of neighbouring boys' villages, singing and dancing, and cuddling. In a bride's hut intercourse *inter crura* is permitted, and no 'husband' can claim damages if his betrothed wife lies with another young man there, unless penetration has taken place. On moonlight nights the girls [134]

[1] Information from Christian women who knew the exact ages of their daughters and of pagan contemporaries of their daughters. Cases of first menstruation ranging from the ages of 12 to 18 were cited, but those under 14 years old were regarded as unusually young. The mothers' information was confirmed by a woman missionary who ran a school for Christian adolescent girls in the district. [145]

2: Wilson E-5 (1934-1938)1957 FN17 Ngonde FN17
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at the groom's home (*ukunukunula*). The party was given a hen when they arrived and a second the next morning. The groom and some of his friends spent the night with the bride and her friends. (He and she lie together on this occasion but do not yet have full intercourse.)[1] In the morning the mother-in-law shaved the bride's head, eyebrows, and eyelashes, leaving only a small tuft on the nape of her neck. Then she mixed water with powdered medicine and poured it for groom and bride to wash. The groom washed his hands and mouth only, the bride her hands and mouth and whole body. During her seclusion she might not use oil or the red powder favoured as a cosmetic by Nyakyusa women,[2] but after this third washing she was free to do so, and she oiled herself meticulously. Meantime the groom was shaved by one of his friends.

On the same day the bride returned to her father's homestead with her own party and seven 'mothers' of the groom who brought five stems of bananas, a pot of water, and a small bull for the ritual of 'clearing out the litter' (*ukusoya ulufimbo*). She herself was wearing the skin of a bull over her head—'she wears any skin she can get hold of'. One of the groom's party shaved off the last tuft of her hair and buried it carefully in the *ulufimbo*, the litter of banana leaves on which she had slept and sat during her seclusion. Had her own mother been present she would have shaved also and so should the brother, but he did not do so. The groom's mother and Kyobwe (representing the bride's mother) carried out the litter to the edge of the banana plantation surrounding the homestead. As they did so they whispered to each other. Kyobwe said the bride was a little liar. Her husband had offered her 1s. to take to her mothers and she had refused it saying: 'No, they swear at me and grudge me food.' 'She's your child,' said the mother-in-law. 'No,' said Kyobwe, 'she's another woman's child, she's a foolish child.' Every scrap of litter in the hut was carefully collected and a little of the soil below it scraped off and carried out with the leaves. All who had helped with the clearing washed their hands carefully.

Then the groom's mother made a basin of two banana leaves close to the pile of litter. Into it she poured the water her party had brought with them, and sprinkled in powdered medicine in

[1] One or two informants maintained that 'she must not refuse him now or he will refuse to wash with her, saying: "She is not my wife."' But others were insistent that according to strict custom only intercourse *inter crura* was allowed. Full intercourse at this time would make nonsense of the *ilibalaga* ritual which follows.

[2] Formerly also by men: cf. V. Giraud, *Les Lacs de l'Afrique Equatoriale* (1890), p. 176.

8:Wilson E-5 (1934-1936)1936 FN17 Ngonde FN17
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present possesses. A young man is given cows by his father and sends them to his father-in-law; his father's income in cattle is derived partly from the increase of his own stock, but chiefly from the marriages of his own and his brothers' sisters and daughters, for it is the custom for full-brothers and half-brothers to give one another cows as their daughters and sisters get married; the young man's father-in-law gives the cows which he receives some to his brothers, some to his sons, and some he keeps himself. And thus, continually, the cattle are driven down the paths of human relationship.

The passage of cattle makes the children of a marriage legitimate and members of their father's family; the sons can inherit from their father, and the daughters, when they marry in their turn, bring cattle to him. But if a woman bears a child to a man who has given no cows for her, the child is illegitimate, has no right of inheritance anywhere, and belongs either to her husband or father, not to its own biological sire.

Getting married is not a single event; the marriage-cattle are seldom handed over all at once, but in one, two, or three over a period of years; and a girl very commonly goes to visit and sleep with her betrothed husband, from time to time, for several years before she finally sets up house with him and begins to bear his children. There are three ways of getting married: (1) by negotiation with the girl's father (2) by running off with an unmarried girl (3) by running off with a married woman. The first is the ideal, socially approved, method and is not uncommonly followed. The negotiations often begin while the girl is still an infant, sometimes even before she is born; the man sends one or two cows to her father to bespeak her (*ukutengyela*). These cows are counted as part of the marriage-cattle (*isyavelo*) and the girl is henceforth called his "wife," but she lives at home with her parents. Sometimes a boy is betrothed by his father while he himself is still young, but always, I think, to a girl several years his junior. Such betrothals are determined by the friendship of the two families. A girl who is bespoken in infancy does not, ideally, go to live altogether with her husband till after she has reached puberty and passed through the elaborate initiation which then takes place. But there is an intermediate period when, from the age of ten or earlier, she is allowed to visit and sleep with her husband from time to time. The man sends a bull or a hen to her father to ask for his wife (*ukwesukisha*), and the old man agrees to let her go on ceremonial visits. But she is seldom allowed to go until at least three cows, in all, have been received for her. She is not supposed to be deflowered before puberty and she and her husband always, at first, practise limited intercourse without penetration. Not infrequently, however, full intercourse

8: Wilson E-5 (1934-1936)1936 FN17 Ngonde FN17
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583 takes place on some occasion and her parents usually find out when it
584 does. In some families the girl's mother examines her after each visit to
836 her husband to see if the hymen is intact, sometimes the girl tells her mother herself. When her father hears about it his action is determined partly by his feelings towards his son-in-law, partly by his need for cattle. Sometimes he does nothing at all; occasionally he sends back the cows he has received for his daughter and breaks off the marriage, and this is particularly likely to happen if the girl has been forced against her will or generally ill-treated. More usually, however, he sends his daughter to live with her husband saying: "You have made her a woman yourself, you must pay the rest of the marriage-cattle quickly."

836 We have no evidence to suggest that the girls in any general way dislike sleeping with their husbands before puberty, rather the reverse; and the men say: "It is good, it accustoms a girl to her husband." But some girls dislike the particular men to whom they are betrothed.

881 The initiation of a girl at puberty lasts for some months and includes several exchanges of food between her family and that of her husband, and a number of ceremonies in which both her girl friends of the same
[584] village[4] and her husband's friends from his village[4] participate. If a girl is not bespoken before puberty the initiation is still carried out in a modified form, but its full significance is lost.

585 Soon after her initiation a girl, if she has been bespoken, goes to live altogether with her husband, to play her part in his economy and to bear him children. If only a few cows have been received for her, her father insists on one or two more being handed over before she is allowed to go. At some time, perhaps during the girl's initiation, perhaps years later, the final marriage ceremony (*ukukwa*) takes place. The balance of the marriage-cattle are brought to her father by the husband and his village neighbours,[4] her "mothers" prepare a great deal of food for the guests to eat, there is dancing, feasting and great excitement.

554 The number of cows handed over varies with the wealth and social
583 status of the two families concerned. Six to ten cows is the most usual number, but sometimes as few as four or as many as thirty change hands.

583 The second method of marriage is adopted when a man falls in love with a grown girl, who is not bespoken, and cannot find the cows to satisfy her father at once; he runs off with her and regularizes the position
583 later by sending cattle. The third method is adopted when a man falls
937 in love with a married woman and has cows available; he runs off with

[4] Vide index "The Age Village" A
[p. 249, col. 2] Analysis

8:Wilson E-5 (1934-1936)1936 FN17 Ngonde FN17
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boys tell all sorts of stories, especially about women, they discuss love-making and women, and tell tales of their own conquests. The younger ones listen to these things and that is all right in the boys' village, that is how we learn. But we compare in our minds and think that if a boy stays at home it is as if he listened to all this from his parents, and people always do talk lewdly at night; and that is very bad, that is foolishness.—But in the boys' village it is good for the young ones to listen, that is how children grow up."

On another occasion when I told this same man that in Europe many people thought it a good thing for boys to get sexual instruction from their parents and teachers he was shocked: "But I think it is impossible" he protested "for parents to go into detail with their children; there is too much shame on both sides. And if they did, it would damage the children's respect for them."

There is thus a correlation in this society between the age-village system at its genesis and the belief that a boy's dawning interest in sex must be informed, not by his parents, but by friends only a little older than himself.

Few men marry before twenty-five years of age, but affairs with girls begin before puberty. All affairs are related in detail to friends in the age-village, and the younger ones learn by listening; and they also learn when the older boys send them as messengers to the girls of their fancy.

Besides the more serious love affairs which are carried on in secret, groups of boys from the same age-village commonly flirt with any girls they meet on the way, and it is then that the incest taboos are learnt. If one of the boys is known to be related to one of the girls, either through a common grandfather or great-grandfather, his companions send him away: "Don't you see your sister is here? You cannot come!"

Contrary to a general belief about "primitive" societies, homosexual intercourse is common in the boys' villages, between close friends, but there is no real perversion; homosexuality is said to be always *fauto de mieux*. The older men in discussion dismiss it with the tolerant word "adolescence," it is never continued after marriage, and all except the feeble-minded get married sooner or later.

But life in a boys' village also gives its members much information and wisdom unconnected with sex. There, as we have seen, boys perfect their skill in building, and there also they learn to argue and express themselves with adult fluency. It is characteristic of the Nyakyusa legal

9: Wilson E-5 (1934-1955) 1959
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like most of the leaders of Zionist Churches in the south.[1] It is noticeable that the two 'independent' Churches have a more elaborate form of service than the Church from which their leaders have sprung, and Ngemela habitually wears conspicuous vestments. There is, of course, great variation between different denominations in the emphasis placed on ritual, some Protestants abjuring it and turning their very insistence on starkness and simplicity into a ritual in itself—a taboo. There seems to be a clear tendency in Southern Africa for 'independent' Churches to express themselves more and more in ritual and less in dogma. In this way they reduce the gap between themselves and the pagans, for the pagan religion is expressed almostly exclusively in ritual, whereas Christianity is expressed in creeds and confessions as well as in the rituals of the Church.

(e) THE CONTRAST BETWEEN PAGAN AND CHRISTIAN

There are certain common elements in the rituals celebrated by pagans and Christians: some of the occasions are the same, and in the conceptions of sacrifice, of death and rebirth, of confession and cleansing, there are similarities; but there are also profound differences. The conception of life, immortality, replaces the preoccupation with fertility, for though most Nyakyusa Christians, like the pagans, regard celibacy as evidence of physical abnormality, and the conventional desire of a woman is to have six children—a quiverful in Nyakyusa eyes—yet fertility is no longer the end of all being, sought in every ritual. There are profound differences, too, in the values expressed in the rituals regarding sex relations, the range of moral obligations, and social change. In pagan thought polygyny is good—a man should have many children. Child marriage is defended on the ground that a girl 'gets accustomed to her husband' if she goes to him early, and homosexual relations between youths and young men are tolerated since they have no wives and *cannot* marry if the older men are polygynists. What is upheld is the chastity of women, and a total separation of the sex activities of members of successive generations, expressed in the taboos limiting familiarity between mother and son, father and nubile daughter, father-in-law and daughter-law. In Christian thought it is the 'pure in heart' who 'see God' and this is interpreted by the mission Churches to imply monogamy. Only in the 'independent' African Churches is it asserted

[1] The emphasis on healing, so common in the south, is absent.